

Transformative Dynamics of Corruptive Systems

Annamaria Rufino^a

Abstract

The impact of the global communication system significantly affects the dissemination of corruptive practices, helping to mix truth and falsehood, and confusing the objective interpretation of the dynamics. Corruptive traps get confused with the perception of the emergency. The difficulty of regulatory systems in preventing and correcting the corruption phenomenon contributes to spreading its traps in the social system.

Keywords: communication, insecurity, traps.

1. Introduction

The Corruption phenomenon is a highly topical and particular-emergency.

To clarify the theme, I will use concrete examples, mainly referable to Italy, but specifics aside, the underlying general dynamics and model can be pinpointed in other contexts. It has been disseminated as a “model” all over the world, as will be clear in the analysis of the phenomenon. It should be noted that the list of corrupt countries and indicators used varies continuously, for different reasons. On the other hand, in particular in this period, there is news of corruption problems in many countries all over the world. This did not emerge until recently, it is not talked about. One of the main mistakes made in the narrative of corruption is to consider corruption as a distant dynamic, distant from the social system. It is not so.

In the introduction, it must be said that corruption is an ancient phenomenon, which affected territories and States all over the world (Klitgaard, 1988). To this we must add that there are countries where corruption phenomena are not evident. But, today, this has changed, we could anticipate that it has become “normalized”.

^a Department of Engineering, University of Campania Luigi Vanvitelli, Aversa (CE), Italy.

Corresponding author:
Annamaria Rufino
E-mail: annamaria.rufino@unicampania.it

Received: 22 June 2023
Accepted: 02 December 2023
Published: 09 February 2024



Copyright rests with the author/s. This is an open access, peer reviewed article published under the Creative Commons License (CC BY 3.0).

I will use interpretative models, which could be read in different ways, but substantially do not modify the meaning of the corruptive phenomena. Let's try to interpret what has determined the change that has occurred, starting with the spread of globalization. The main novelty of globalization, indeed the current, conclusive outcome of the transformation of globalization itself, has been the widespread dissemination of corruption phenomena, in micro and macro-systems.

The global demolition of barriers and borders, in fact, has not only led to a transformation of political, economic, financial, environmental and regulatory phenomena, but also to the contagious inclusion of all the relevant institutional and social practices, and, therefore, also of corruption.

Especially in a time of emergency, such as the current one, with the energy crisis, environmental disasters, humanitarian tragedies, war events and the crisis caused by the pandemic, it becomes increasingly easy and frequent to be attracted by what appear to be forms of facilitation, simplification or even safeguard which in truth are distorting and corrupting traps, capable of undermining the normal management of those risky dynamics.

But it is not easy to identify, at the origin, how these corruptive dynamics are determined, since they often appear to be normal.

By normal, in the technical sense, we mean a system of respect, compliance and protection of the legal norm. But it should also be emphasized that the legal norm has currently lost the founding value, that it originally had. Indeed, ordinary citizens are unable to recognize and acknowledge such value because they find it difficult to identify and comprehend.

This is especially evident in times of emergency. In fact, the attraction of a corruption trap also derives from widespread difficulties and risks, from successive emergencies and from the inconsistency of decision-making processes, above all in terms of problem-solving ability. The difficulty in deciding what to do to solve problems can be conducive to facilitative and corruptive practices. The difficulty in identifying which institution is entrusted with the task of addressing an issue, which is, actually, capable of giving answers and which holds accountability, can be really overwhelming. As a result, it can leave citizens feeling helpless or alone and make them prone to fall into these traps.

This attractive capacity determines a double phenomenon, specular in the two expressions: we have become accustomed to paying attention to macroscopic news of a corruptive type, such as the one that involved the European Parliament, but, at the same time, we have been “normally” distracted by what happens in the day-to-day life, in terms of “distraction” from legality and non-compliance with the law.

2. Communication, truth and falsehood

More than analyzing the phenomena of corruption in its structure and function, a reflection should be made on the relationship between truth and falsehood. In this sense, we must bring into question the theme of communication, in all of its aspects.

Let's make a preliminary consideration. By listening to the media, browsing social media, we read news every day, we acquire data, information, descriptions, narratives, which are soon afterwards systematically “suppressed”, denied or contradicted, and then just forgotten. This communicative whirlwind generates confusion and insecurity (Rufino, 2020), but, even more seriously, it disorients everyone by disrupting any coherent and consistent interpretative paradigm.

Cognitive tools are indispensable to us for orienting ourselves, not only in daily life, but also for interpreting the rules that govern it or should govern it.

This is the first black hole from which to start to define the citizens' difficulty in understanding what can be done and what must not be done. And corruption falls into this second category.

It must be said that with globalization the boundary between what is legal and what is illegal has become thinner, as if the approach to corruptive dynamics was suspended in a dangerous limbo, where the possibilities of distancing oneself from the attractiveness of giving in to corruptive practices are progressively reduced.

This is a distractive phenomenon, also determined by cognitive deficits, as I said before.

This is a general picture, but it must be said that the scale of values varies between different territories and different countries.

We are well aware that Italy is perceived, among European countries, as a country where corruption is endemic, and perceived as the country that exported corruptive dynamics, to the rest of the world. Suffice it to recall the relationship between the Mafia and the USA, at the beginning of the 20th century (well narrated in the film *Il Padrino – The Godfather*), or at the end of World War 2 (the landing of the Allies), or, today, the criminal takeover of some specific economic sectors, such as catering, in many countries, by criminal systems and organizations of Italian origin, of course.

With respect to this analysis, some might posit that criminal systems/organizations are something different from corruption.

It is not so!

3. A corruption chain: Qatar gate and World Cup

Perhaps once upon a time the boundaries of contamination were stronger and more stable, today there is no solution of continuity (Lenz and Lipset, 2000). Suffice it to cite Qatar gate as an example. The corruptive model adopted by the European parliamentarians has involved institutions, markets, tourism, sport, fashion, commerce, energy, political forces and we could add much more. This is an example that can be useful to highlight, precisely, the transience of the limit/boundaries we have been talking about. It would be interesting to map all the areas and individual subjects who, cascade like, have taken advantage of that system of corruption.

If we wanted to probe further in detail, we could imagine including civil servants, even European ones, financial operators, political colleagues, taxi drivers, bartenders, airlines, and so on. It is not an exaggeration, certainly we cannot assume that they have all been directly or consciously involved, but they have seen, heard, perceived, tolerated and, finally, surrendered to the corruptive model.

How many might follow in their footsteps, perhaps in the future or in other areas? The corruptive model is attractive and can be activated at any time, perhaps in the presence of a difficulty or a career progression situation, just to give the simplest examples. It is a “potential” threat lurking in the dark and apparently dormant, but it can be activated when necessary.

Another example, certainly extreme, is the case of Matteo-Messina Denaro who spent 30 years on the run hiding from the authorities. During those 30 years, many have certainly been consciously attracted by the “trap” of the boss, many knew, perhaps many did not react out of the fear of retaliation, but others may have looked the other way because of the prospect of a reward or compensation. Obviously, we exclude from this evaluation the names of those who have already been “officially” traced by the police (but even for these names we would have to wonder). Everyone wondered who decided that the fugitive was not supposed to be caught and who decided when he was. More will be known in a few years, meanwhile the corruption system will have produced its effects.

We have mentioned two extreme cases: in the middle there is “normal” society, that is still the recipient of those models and that communication that is a source of disorientation.

I called it a “normal” society, but I have to correct myself, because today there is very little that is normal. Society has fragmented, it is disheartened or, at best, is in transformation. This latter aspect makes society more vulnerable, in its certainties, even in the recognition of legality. Transformation is perceived as disconnection from institutions, values and trust (Alberti, 2018).

The danger of the attractiveness of corruption is very high precisely because of this weakness, the attractiveness not only to be directly involved, but also to tolerate the possibility of crossing the line. Tolerance becomes a driving force that fuels corruption: let's think of what happens in the public administration, in the most basic choices that citizens have to make. Of course, little is known about so much, but there is a widespread belief that wherever the dynamics are the same, no administration is excluded.

What should citizens do? Distancing themselves completely is often perceived as a failure, a renunciation that has a "price" and as exclusion from any chance, not guaranteed by "normality". This is true in times of difficulty, like the current one.

In many contexts, tolerance is precisely the fruit of that distorting perception and communication.

Let's go back again to the Qatar gate case, which is emblematic as a chain of corruption. We have all heard of the involvement of parliamentarians', in obtaining money by sponsoring Qatar, declaring that it was a country that cared about rights, which was not true then and is not true now. But we have also heard of the many victims caused by the construction of the stadiums during the World Cup, compared to these deaths, due to the exploitation of labor beyond any possible tolerance, none of the States felt obliged to protest.

Even in this case, however, the interests driving from the business produced by the sporting competition had to be protected. But we can go even further back, to when it was decided that the World Cup would take place in Qatar. Also, in this case the bargaining of the interests to be protected prevailed over the possibility of sanctioning Qatar with a NO.

So, the chain was composed, a corruptive chain that has trampled and still tramples human rights, even before the civil rights and the very lives of millions of people.

One should not even be surprised at the corruption of those parliamentarians, they were part of the chain. Despite all these serious incident data, the denial of rights that still persists in Qatar has once again been overlooked and ignored.

Perhaps many of you have noticed that an advertisement is often broadcast inviting you to spend your holidays in Qatar! The listeners are "distracted" once again by a communication that "covers" and numbs the civil conscience. Many will go to Qatar and end up forgetting that it is a country where violence is perpetuated. But are these manifestations of violence different from those that are spoken of in other contexts? No, simply in the case of Qatar the chain of corruption covers them.

Qatar is not the only country involved in these chains of corruption, in the measurement scale we can include many, not least what we hear in the Russian-

Ukrainian war, but also in the case of migration, in Brazil, and so on. But this case of corruption, Qatar gate, help us to understand what I said at the beginning, namely that corruption goes beyond all possible limits and involves, more or less everyone, knowingly or unknowingly.

Let's go back again to the first question: using the Qatar gate case, what can citizens do? Citizens in this case, in addition to adopting an associative approach or demonstrating – I don't remember anything about that!!! – can only refuse to go to Qatar, it would be a “correction” from below, some might say that is very little, yes, but it could lead to something. Travel agencies may not offer Qatar, of course, TVs may not broadcast advertisements and so on.

But the problem is that interest and earnings dominate everyone and everything, favored by the unawareness and ignorance of the facts. Selfishness could be added to unawareness, which today has increased due to the situation of uncertainty and precariousness that has spread throughout the world.

4. Globalization and emergency: Regulatory Shopping

Corruption feeds on the fragility of civil society, which is undoubtedly experiencing a global crisis. Economic and social instability are certainly the main factors that can lead to an increase in corruption. But the complex overlapping of regulatory systems has certainly contributed to the increase in corruption phenomena.

This is the case of the relationship between European regulations and national regulations. Just think of Regulatory Shopping (which we could define as a “forerunner” of regulatory globalization and, also, of corruption). The regulatory stratification creates decision making and operational holes, where it is easier for corruptive processes to be grafted.

In these “spaces”, even unknowingly, the ordinary citizen can be entangled in irregularities, in the simplest case, but also in real dynamics of corruption. Especially in these cases, the real problem is that neither preventive nor corrective actions are activated. Hence, the progressive dissemination of corruption and malpractice.

We have talked about the overcoming of dividing borders between states and territories, not in the sense of geographically traceable borders, but of communication borders, of economic and financial ones, “cultural” borders as well. Overcoming borders overlaps in many ways with an identity problem and therefore with that of contamination, which, from a cultural point of view, is a positive phenomenon. It is not for the topic we are dealing with, that is, for corruption.

Northern European countries are normally perceived as countries where corruption does not drive, on the contrary, the further we go south, including in the individual countries of continental Europe, the more widespread the phenomenon is.

The common interpretative model is the one that equates the south with poverty, unemployment, economic and industrial difficulties. Therefore, we must conclude that corruption is endemic in poor territories. In many ways this is the case, even if, as we have already said, today it is a global phenomenon.

Why does corruption seem to be endemic in the territories in most difficulty?

Difficulties make citizens more fragile and susceptible to blackmail, therefore they are more easily attracted to facilitations and tend to tolerate corruption phenomena, even out of fear.

Wanting to broaden the discussion, one could hypothesize that if corruption is so widespread today, it means that the world lives in such a condition of fragility and insecurity, that the corruption opportunities exceed the boundaries of the territories traditionally affected by those phenomena.

Mafia, camorra and n'drangheta have ridden the tiger of global transformations, exploiting the local difficulties/criticalities and spreading the corruption phenomena in the strictest sense. This is why, today, we cannot distinguish criminal actions from merely corruptive ones. The common ground is structured on interest and economic benefits.

There are a few countries in the world that are not caught up in this vortex. Those involved have vulnerable cultural and ethical self-defense systems (that can be drilled), while those not involved, in addition to solid ethical and moral systems, probably also prove to be less attractive for easy money earning schemes. Let's take the case of the countries of northern Europe. Most of these countries exhibit certain differences compared to continental Europe: the territorial distance, which somehow isolates those territories, the considerably lower population density than in continental Europe, the food, commercial and their eating habits, commercial practices and lifestyles, which do not align with global standards, at least in a part of those territories, and a greater availability of resources. These characteristics combined with a solid ethical grounding and a regulatory corruption filter make these countries less susceptible to criminal infiltration. Add to this the anti-corruption filter of a regulatory type, adequately settled.

If we reverse this model in continental Europe, the implementation differences of the corruption systems are unequivocal.

But let's go back to the relationship between truth and falsehood. We could say that corruption is a sort of "amnesty" of lies. Let's take an apparently trivial example: the two most recent exceptional events: the case of Ischia and the

earthquake in Turkey. These have highlighted how infractions of building codes, regulations and permits can be condoned as a legitimization of falsehood. Providing even ordinary citizens with a way/facilitation to legalize the infringement of rules, meant to ensure the safety of the general public system, cost the nations dearly in terms of loss of life.

Condoning the abuse and condoning the lies coincided.

Therefore, by extending the reasoning to the more general dynamics of corruption, we can undoubtedly state that corruption has a cost. A cost in terms of protection and safety, which can be treated under the illusion that the advantage is greater than the costs.

It is not easy to convey this assessment and agree on this assessment and makes credible the juridical maxim: *vigilantibus non dormientibus jura succurrunt* trampled on by the brutally disrespected during the emergency leads us to believe that what is easy is preferable choice. Vigilance involves effort, but the global world has led us into the illusion that everything can be easy and achievable. This is the real trap.

Corruption is a transversal, vertical and horizontal system. A system as such can functionally and structurally overlap all legally structured systems.

Compared to all formally “accredited” systems, the corruption system activates “hole punching” actions that produce multiple effects which, as such, are difficult to trace. The reasons lie in the issue of truth *versus* lies, as already highlighted.

5. European Funds and exemplary cases: PNRR, Superbonus, Environmental Disasters

Let's take another example: the problems connected to PNRR. Due to the changes taking place, they are exemplary because they allow to broaden the conceptual horizon, in that the proposed measures were conceived in the design stage so as to allow for self-protection actions from competitive interference and de-normalization. In this sense, it may be useful to compare two items of formal configuration, which contrast the two systems we intend to analyze: the institutional-legal one and the corruptive one.

The juridical-formal one – we could take the PNRR as an example to simplify – it has a defining and forecasting character, we could call predictive. As a predictive system, all citizens who interact with it have the opportunity to “know” and “recognize” their own unlawful behaviors, as well as those of others, including the institutions (public administration *in primis*, but not least those of the judicial system), but they can also choose what to do, weigh the possible consequences, even the most extreme in terms of punishment.

It is a risk that, consciously or not, everyone can evaluate, but it is, in any case, a definable, classifiable and identifiable risk.

Italy has a relatively rigid legal system (certainly much more, than other European or international systems), as a consequence the legal change becomes effective only after “verifications”, that is, after it produces concrete effects, after the formal configuration of the change, where it occurs, also due to bottom-up processes—for pushes from below, defined in the ways and within the limitations, in fact, imposed by law.

We can briefly summarize what, a norm “actually” and systematically formalizes, using “a” norm only as an explanatory case. So, a norm:

1. Identifies a goal, knowing and naming the necessary and possible behaviors to pursue it.
2. Foresees the risks of unlawful or *contra legem* behavior.
3. Outlines the degrees and graduality of actions, having overall reference to the system of the norms, also in the literal sense of the term, or rather as a midpoint of extreme behaviors.

But let’s go back to the exemplary case of the PNRR. It is significant that the PNRR is structured in parallel as an active action, as a preventive one, and indeed as a defensive one with respect to possible areas of unlawfulness. Taking into account the evaluation and comparative parameters between the various European countries (European Commission, 2017), unfortunately, it must be said that this connotation is predominantly specific only to our country.

One has to ask oneself why. An explanatory hypothesis can be put forward. To date, a true modeling of the corruption phenomena has never been done in Italy, limiting the analysis as a whole and specific cases to the reconstruction of same cases (such as those connected to the PNRR). But this will be seen once the funds have been allocated (Carloni, 2022).

When I speak of the absolute absence of a modeling analysis, I mean, above all, highlighting the black hole in the reconstruction of corruption phenomena as an impact assessment of individuals and the social system, as well as of course the regulatory one.

The absence of well-structured modeling contributes to determining the ineffectiveness of corrective and, even more so, preventive interventions, as well as generating smoky “information items” in the social system, which easily predispose to a plea bargain, to an attitude of tolerance and, last but not least, to the widespread acquired habit of passive acquiescence on the part of the citizen. Disconnecting the various phases, neglecting what makes a context susceptible *a priori* and *a posteriori* of the corruptive “fertile” action, represents the real incentive to the corruptive hypertrophy especially in certain areas and countries.

Corruption is not just a contagious “chain”, whose links should be severed, but a multilayered network, held together by contagious behavior that alters the truth and deactivates the very effectiveness of the rules and control systems. Not only honest citizens are damaged, but the entire social and regulatory system as well, given that the main feature of the corruptive action is its disseminative potential.

Therefore, the calculation of the economic damage, central to traditional analyses and generally used to parameterize the whole corruption phenomenon, is independent of the real and subjective data, in the absence of a mapping of the disseminated actions and even more of the victims of corruption. And here we can highlight the disconnection between the predictive and normalizing function of the rules of law and the concrete work of those who, personally or unwittingly co-authors, activate the corruptive processes.

Misjudgment, superficiality and casual availability or tolerance constitute the framework where the dynamics of corruption are placed. Definitely, a framework where it is not easy to penetrate, also because it would require a sense of responsibility/accountability, which is difficult to achieve. But another missing figure should be highlighted, the deactivation of protection and “correction” tools, because not only is the individual citizen disarmed/helpless due to the ineffectiveness of preventive control systems and punitive interventions, but he does not in many cases find interlocutors to turn to (Rufino, 2022).

In this sense, in an etymological sense, we must focus our attention on the term “responsibility”. It might all seem like a path of underestimation, but it is not like that, indeed this is the biggest problem that prevents Italy from defending itself from corruption.

So much so that the rankings in this sense leave no room for doubt. If it is true, as it is true, that ours is a legal-normative system of excellence, the reason for the failure of the system lies in the inadequacy of the prevention/correction tools. As a result, the corruption phenomenon is disseminated at all levels, in the small, indeed from small to large dynamics, seamlessly.

6. Mafias in the world: classification hypothesis

In conclusion, one last example, absolutely current, especially in Italy, is the so called *superbonus*. A useful example to define the costs of corruption. The original idea was, in part, certainly commendable, for the structural interventions to improve the building heritage. However, the measure triggered into action a potential network of malpractice and corruption operators.

Near-sighted companies, professionals, administrators and banks have entered these corrupting black holes and have taken the easy road to increase their earnings. Many unaware citizens will pay the consequences. Lack of control, collusion and decision-making approximations, in many cases deliberately conceived as such, have aggravated the unawareness and the fragility of many citizens.

The cases we have talked about are mainly specific to Italy, but, as a model, similarities can be found in many countries. The Italian cases are talked about more, others are kept silent. But it must be said that corruption is the main cause of economic and social difficulties, in Italy and beyond. It is certainly significant that in Italy, in order to address the possible non-use of PNRR funds they adopted a bid/procurement code that re-proposes the same corruptive model of the super-bonus which attests to the “inclusive” circularity of the corruptive circuits.

In the map of corruption and crime, the camorra is: in the third place, the ‘ndrangheta in the fourth place, the mafia in the sixth place. But we should not underestimate the impact and position of the Chinese Triadr, especially if we consider China’s occupation of market, its productive activities and its role in international finance and banking. The case of Russia-Ukrainian war may be considered in this sense a winning model.

We could consider the global corruption model traced. Of course, other specifics aspects probed for further detail.

We can conclude that Triadr, Mafia, Camorra and ‘ndrangheta have international citizenship, they are truly cosmopolitan, at least as far as corruption is concerned.

References

- Alberti, V. (2018). *Pane sporco. Combattere la corruzione e la mafia con la cultura*. Milano: Rizzoli.
- Carloni, E. (2022). L’anticorruzione e la trasparenza nel sistema di *procurement* pubblico: tendenze e prospettive ai tempi del PNRR. *Diritto amministrativo*, 3, 641-665.
- European Commission (2017). *Corruption-Special Eurobarometer*, Eurobarometer, n. 470, 1-180.
- Klitgaard, R. (1988). *Controlling Corruption*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Lenz, G., & Lipset, S. M. (2000). *Corruption, Culture and Market*. New York: Culture Matters.

- Rufino, A. (2020). *In-security. The Communication of Fear in the Mid-Global Era*. Milan-Udine: Mimesis International.
- Rufino, A. (2022). Anomic Dependence and Corruptive Contagion. Regulatory Hypercomplexity and Social Fragmentation in the Mid-Global Era. *Italian Sociological Review*, 12(2), 589-600.